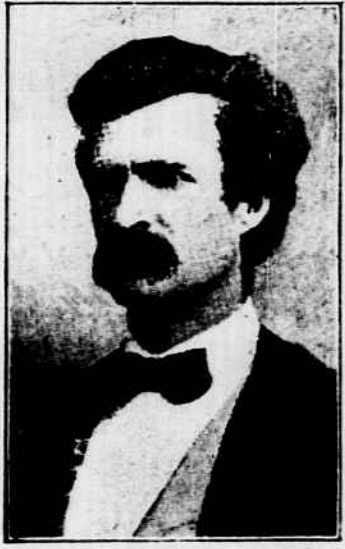


THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

Things Which Happened Sixty Years Ago



In 1873.

[Dictated March 9, 1906.]

I AM talking of a time sixty years ago and upwards. I remember the names of some of those schoolmates, and, by fitful glimpses, even their faces rise

dimly before me for a moment,—only just long enough to be recognized; then they vanish. I catch glimpses of George Robards, the Latin pupil,—slender, pale, studious, bending over his book and absorbed in it, his long, straight black hair hanging down below his jaws like a pair of curtains on the sides of his face. I can see him give his head a toss and flit one of the curtains back around his head,—to get it out of his way, apparently; really to show off.

In that day it was a great thing among the boys to have hair of so flexible a sort that it could be flung back in that way, with a flirt of the head. George Robards was the envy of us all; for there was no hair among us that was so competent for this exhibition as his, except, perhaps, the yellow locks of Will Bowen and John Robards. My hair was a dense ruck of short curls, and so was my brother Henry's. We tried all kinds of devices to get these crooks straightened out so that they would flirt; but we never succeeded. Sometimes, by soaking our heads and then combing and brushing our hair down tight and flat to our skulls, we could get it straight temporarily, and this gave us a comforting moment of joy; but the first time we gave it a flirt it all shriveled into curls again, and our happiness was gone.

JOHN ROBARDS was the little brother of George. He was a wee chap, with silky golden curtains to his face which dangled to his shoulders and below, and could be flung back ravishingly. When he was twelve years old he crossed the plains with his father amidst the rush of the gold seekers of '49; and I remember the departure of the cavalcade when it spurred westward. We were all there to see and to envy. And I can still see that proud little chap sailing by on a great horse, with his long locks streaming out behind.

We were all on hand to gaze and envy when he returned, two years later, in unimaginable glory—for he had traveled! None of us had ever been forty miles from home; but he had crossed the continent! He had been in the gold mines, that fairyland of our imagination! And he had done a still more wonderful thing. He had been in ships,—in ships on the actual ocean; in ships on three actual oceans! For he had sailed down the Pacific and around the Horn, among icebergs and through snow storms and wild wintry gales, and had sailed on and turned the corner and flown northward in the trades and up through the blistering equatorial waters,—and there in his brown face were the proofs of what he had been through! We would have sold our souls to Satan for the privilege of trading places with him.

I saw him when I was out on that Missouri trip four years ago. He was old then,—though not quite so old as I,—and the burden of life was upon him. He said his granddaughter, twelve years old, had read my books, and would like to see me. It was a pathetic time; for she was a prisoner in her room, and marked for death. And John knew that she was passing swiftly away. Twelve years old—just her grandfather's age when he rode away on that great journey with his yellow hair flapping behind him. In her I seemed to see that boy again. It was as if he had come back out of that remote past and was present before me in his golden youth. Her malady was heart disease, and her brief life came to a close a few days later.

ANOTHER of those schoolboys was John Garth. He became a prosperous banker and a prominent and valued citizen; and a few years ago he died, rich and honored. He died! It is what I have to say about so many of those boys and girls. The widow still lives, and there are grandchildren. In her pantalet days and my barefoot days she was a schoolmate of mine. I saw John's tomb when I made that Missouri visit.

Her father, Mr. Kercheval, had an apprentice in the early days when I was nine years old, and he had also a slave woman who had many merits. But I can't feel very kindly or forgivingly toward either that good apprentice boy or that good slave woman; for they saved my life. One day when I was playing on a loose log which I supposed was attached to a raft,—but it wasn't,—it tilted me into Bear Creek.

And when I had been under water twice and was coming up to make the third and fatal descent my fingers appeared above the water, and that slave woman seized them and pulled me out. Within a week I was in again, and that apprentice had to come along just at the wrong time, and he plunged in and dived, pawed around on the bottom, and found me, and dragged me out, and emptied the water out of me, and I was saved again. I was drowned seven times after that before I learned to swim,—once in Bear Creek and six times in the Mississippi.

I do not now know who the people were who interfered with the intentions of a Providence wiser than themselves; but I hold a grudge against them yet. When I told the tale of these remarkable happenings to Rev. Dr. Burton of Hartford, he said he did not believe it. He slipped on the ice the very next year and sprained his ankle!

Will Bowen was another schoolmate, and so was his brother Sam, who was his junior by a couple of years. Before the Civil War broke out, both became St. Louis and New Orleans pilots. Both are dead, long ago.

[Dictated March 16, 1906.]

WE will return to those school children of sixty years ago. I recall Mary Miller. She was not my first sweetheart; but I think she was the first one that furnished me a broken heart. I fell in love with her when she was eighteen and I was nine; but she scorned me, and I recognized that this was a cold world. I had not noticed that temperature before. I believe I was as miserable as even a grown man could be. But I think that this sorrow did not remain with me long. As I remember it, I soon transferred my worship to Artimisia Briggs, who was a year older than Mary Miller. When I revealed my passion to her, she did not scoff at it. She did

in the town,—after Tom Blankenship ("Huck Finn"),—for although we never saw him eating candy, we supposed that it was, nevertheless, his ordinary diet. He pretended that he never ate it, and didn't care for it because there was nothing forbidden about it,—there was plenty of it and he could have as much of it as he wanted.

He was the first human being to whom I ever told a humorous story, so far as I can remember. This was about Jim Wolfe and the cats; and I gave him that tale the morning after that memorable episode. I thought he would laugh his teeth out. I had never been so proud and happy before, and have seldom been so proud and happy since.

I saw him four years ago when I was out there. He wore a beard, gray and venerable that came halfway down to his knees, and yet it was not difficult for me to recognize him. He had been married fifty-four years. He had many children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and also even posterity, they all said,—thousands,—yet the boy to whom I had told the cat story when we were callow juveniles was still present in that cheerful little old man.

ARTIMISIA BRIGGS got married not long after refusing me. She married Richmond the stone mason, who was my Methodist Sunday school teacher in the earliest days; and he had one distinction which I envied him: at some time or other he had hit his thumb with his hammer, and the result was a thumb nail which remained permanently twisted and distorted and curved and pointed, like a parrot's beak. I should not consider it an ornament now, I suppose; but it had a fascination for me then, and a vast value, because it was the only one in the town. He was a very kindly and considerate Sunday school teacher, and patient and compassionate; so he was the favorite teacher with us little chaps.

In that school they had slender oblong pasteboard blue tickets, each with a verse from the Testament printed on it, and you could get a blue ticket by reciting two verses. By reciting five verses you could get three blue tickets, and you could trade these at the bookcase and borrow a book for a week. I was under Mr. Richmond's spiritual care every now and then for two or three years, and he was never hard upon me. I always recited the same five verses every Sunday. He was always satisfied with the performance. He never seemed to notice that these were the same five foolish virgins that he had been hearing about every Sunday for months. I always got my tickets and exchanged them for a book. They were pretty dreary books; for there was not a bad boy in the entire bookcase. They were all good boys and good girls and drearily uninteresting; but they were better society than none, and I

was glad to have their company and disapprove of it. Twenty years ago Mr. Richmond had become possessed of Tom Sawyer's cave in the hills three miles from town, and had made a tourist resort of it. In 1849, when the gold seekers were streaming through our little town of Hannibal, many of our grown men got the gold fever, and I think that all the boys had it. On the Saturday holidays in summer time we used to borrow skiffs whose owners were not present and go down the river three miles to the cave "hollow" (Missourian for "valley"), and there we staked out claims and pretended to dig gold,—panning out half a dollar a day at first; two or three times as much later, and by and by whole



I Was Drowned
Nine Times Before
I Learned to Swim.

not make fun of it. She was very kind and gentle about it. But she was also firm, and said she did not want to be pestered by children.

And there was Mary Lacy. She was a schoolmate. But she also was out of my class because of her advanced age. She was pretty wild and determined and independent. But she married, and at once settled down and became in all ways a model matron, and was as highly respected as any matron in the town. Four years ago she was still living, and had been married fifty years.

Jimmie McDaniel was another schoolmate. His age and mine about tallied. His father kept the candy shop, and he was the most envied little chap